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ABSTRACT

The increasing participation of women in the labor force has generated research concerning how employed women are perceived by others. Less research has been done concerning how working mothers, particularly those with very young children, are perceived. This study examined how adults viewed working mothers or young children and investigated whether those views were influenced by the mother's marital status. Male (N=48) and female (N=48) adults at a shopping mall were asked to evaluate a briefly depicted adult female stimulus person on 24 7-point bipolar scales which described personality traits and professional performance characteristics. Each subject rated one of four mothers of a young child. The mother was portrayed as either employed or nonemployed and either divorced or married. The results revealed that employed mothers were perceived as more professionally competent but as less dedicated to their families than were nonemployed mothers. Married mothers were rated as more nurturant and as better-adjusted than were divorced mothers. The findings suggest that negative attitudes toward working mothers of young children prevalent in the 1950s through the 1970s still exist, particularly with regard to the mother's family obligations. (Author/NB)

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Perceptions of Mothers: Effects of Employment Status and Marital Status

Claire Etaugh and Karen Nekolny

Abstract

48 female and 48 male adults at a shopping mall evaluated a briefly depicted adult female stimulus person on 24 7-point bipolar scales which described personality traits and professional performance characteristics. Each subject rated one of 4 mothers of a young child. The mother was portrayed as either employed or nonemployed and either divorced or married. Employed mothers were perceived as more professionally competent but as less dedicated to their families than were nonemployed mothers. Married mothers were rated as more nurturant and as better-adjusted than divorced mothers.

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Perceptions of Mothers: Effects of Employment Status and Marital Status

The increasing participation of women in the labor force (National Commission, 1986) has generated research concerning how employed women are perceived by others. The results indicate that the personality and performance traits of employed women are evaluated more favorably than those of nonemployed women (e.g., Bridges, 1987; Etaugh & Petroski, 1985). Little is known, however, about perceptions of working mothers, particularly those with very young children (under age 3), even though this group constitutes the fastest growing segment of the labor force (National Commission, 1986). The popular press of the 1950's through the 1970's generally portrayed working mothers of young children in an unfavorable light (Etaugh, 1980). Does this view still prevail? Additionally, are perceptions of working mothers influenced by their marital status? Is employment considered more acceptable for divorced than for married mothers because of presumed greater need of the former? The present study addressed these questions, using raters more representative of the general public than the college students previously used to study perceptions of employed women.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 48 females and 48 males, of whom 57% were between the ages of 18-25, 23% between 26-35, 11% between 36-45, 4% between 46-55 and 4% over 55 years of age. Almost all (94%) were white. The subjects were shoppers at a middle-class, Midwestern shopping mall.

Procedure

Subjects were told that the study concerned the accuracy of first impressions based on a brief description of a person. Each subject received one of four booklets, in which the description of the stimulus person varied with respect to employment status and marital status. the description read:

> Ann Davis is 36, married (divorced) and has a one-year-old child. She has a master's degree from the University of Illinois in counseling psychology. She works full time as a counseling psychologist. (Formerly, she was employed as a counseling psychologist, but since the birth of her child she has chosen not to work.)

The occupation of counseling psychologist was chosen because in is perceived as sex-neutral (Shinar, 1978). Each description was read by 12 female and 12 male subjects.

Subjects rated the stimulus person on 24 7-point bipolar scales which described personality traits, nurturance behaviors and professional performance characteristics. The favorable pole of the scale appeared on the left for half the items and on the right for the other half.

Results

The ratings for each item were analyzed using a 2x2x2 analysis of variance (Marital Status x Employment Status x Sex of Subject). Table 1 presents *F* values and mean ratings for main effects. The few significant interactions most likely were chance occurrences and are not reported.

The main effect of marital status was significant ($p<.05$) on eight items. In each instance, married mothers were viewed more favorably than divorced mothers. Married mothers were rated as more responsible, happy, secure, stable, professionally competent, comfortable with others, sociable and as having fewer personality adjustment problems.

The main effect of employment status was significant ($p<.05$) on seven items. Employed mothers were considered more competitive, influential, reliable and sociable, but also as more tense, less sensitive to the needs of others, and less dedicated to family.

Subject sex was a significant main effect on four items. Females gave more favorable ratings than males in each case.

Factor analysis yielded four orthogonal factors designated "professional competence", "nurturance", "personal/interpersonal adjustment" and "dedication to family." (See Table 2 for loadings of items on each factor.) The factor scores for each factor were analyzed using a 2x2x2 analysis of variance (Marital Status x Employment Status x Sex of Subject).

The main effect of employment status was significant for the professional competence and dedication to family factors, Fs (1,88) = 7.19, $p<.01$ and 49.72, $p<.001$, respectively. Employed mothers were perceived as more competent (M= -.25) but less dedicated to family (M=.59) than nonemployed mothers (Ms=.25 and -.59, respectively). The significant Marital Status x Employment Status interaction for the professional competence factor, $F(1,88) = 6.55$, $p<.05$, indicates

that the married employed mother (M= -.64) was viewed as more competent than all others.

The main effect of marital status was significant for the nurturance factor, F (1,88) = 6.87, p<.01. Married mothers were seen as more nurturant (M=.26) than divorced mothers (M= -.26). The significant Marital Status x Sex of Subject interaction for the adjustment factor, F (1,88) = 5.16, p<.05, reveals that female subjects also perceived married women as better adjusted than divorced women (Ms = -.47 and .19).

Discussion

The results indicate that employed mothers of young children are evaluated more favorably than nonemployed mothers in the area of work-related behaviors, but less favorably in the area of family responsibility. Employed mothers were perceived as more professionally competent than nonemployed mothers; this was especially true for married mothers. Studies of college students similarly have found that employed women are judged more professionally competent than nonemployed women (Bridges, 1987; Etaugh & Petroski, 1985). Those studies, however, did not find the interaction between employment and marital status obtained here.

Employed mothers were perceived as less dedicated to their families and less sensitive to the needs of others than were nonemployed mothers. This finding suggests that the negative attitudes toward employed mothers of young children prevalent in the 1950's through the 1970's (Etaugh, 1980) still exist, particularly regarding the mother's family obligations.

Maternal employment was not viewed as more acceptable for divorced mothers than for married mothers. Both groups were seen as equally dedicated to their families. And, in the area of work-related behavior, divorced employed mothers were rated as less professionally competent than married employed mothers. The more favorable perceptions of married women extended to nonemployed mothers as well. Both employed and nonemployed married women were evaluated as more nurturant and as better adjusted than their divorced counterparts. This finding is consistent with previous research with college students showing that married individuals are viewed as better adjusted than unmarried individuals (Etaugh & Petroski, 1985; Etaugh & Stern, 1984).

In conclusion, the present results extend the generality of earlier findings with college students in showing how employment and marital variables influence perceptions of mothers. The implications of these findings for the growing number of working mothers who have very young children and/or who are single are discussed.

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Table 1

F Values and Mean Ratings for Items as a Function of Marital Status and Employment Status of Stimulus Person and Sex of Subject

	Marital Status			Employment Status			Sex of Subject		
Item (left pole)	F	Mar.	Div.	F	NonEmp.	Emp.	F	Fem.	Male
Responsible	8.79[b]	2.10	3.02	.02	2.54	2.58	1.47	2.38	2.75
Selfish	.68	5.23	4.96	.11	5.15	5.04	.49	5.21	4.98
Competitive	.34	3.56	3.75	7.28[b]	4.10	3.21	.87	3.81	3.50
Unhappy	12.05[c]	5.25	4.31	.01	4.79	4.77	3.19	5.02	4.54
Secure	4.80[a]	2.69	3.40	.06	3.08	3.01	.25	2.96	3.13
Dedicated to career	2.94	3.33	3.92	48.72[c]	4.81	2.44	.96	3.79	3.46
Insensitive to needs of others	.69	5.50	5.23	5.03[a]	5.73	5.00	2.57	5.63	5.10
Great personal satisfaction	2.06	3.27	3.75	2.06	3.75	3.27	1.72	3.29	3.73
Unstable	5.84[a]	5.48	4.79	.91	5.00	5.27	5.84[a]	5.48	4.79
Friendly	.02	3.19	3.23	2.77	3.48	2.94	.02	3.19	3.23
Tense	.44	4.50	4.31	3.94[a]	4.69	4.13	1.56	4.58	4.23
Dependent	.14	4.90	5.04	.48	4.83	5.10	.23	5.06	4.88
Affectionate	2.18	2.79	3.23	3.60	2.73	3.29	2.61	2.77	3.25
Unintelligent	2.72	6.40	6.04	.01	6.21	6.23	2.12	6.38	6.06
Professionally competent	4.78[a]	2.67	3.40	.88	3.19	2.88	.01	3.04	3.02
Likable	.06	2.96	3.02	.86	2.88	3.10	1.59	2.83	3.15
Unreliable	2.47	5.70	5.35	8.28	5.20	5.84	8.77[b]	5.85	5.19
Has personality adjustment problems	5.01[a]	5.15	4.58	1.56	4.70	5.02	1.56	5.02	4.70
Successful in job	2.67	2.91	3.48	.00	3.20	3.19	.75	3.04	3.34

(table continues)

Item (left pole)	F	Mar.	Div.	F	NonEmp.	Emp.	F	Fem.	Male
Uninfluential	.08	4.83	4.92	5.30[a]	4.54	5.21	2.98	5.13	4.63
Dedicated to family	.48	2.98	2.75	24.58[c]	2.04	3.69	.89	2.71	3.02
Unattractive	.01	4.52	4.54	.24	4.48	4.58	4.19[a]	4.75	4.31
Comfortable with others	4.21[a]	2.65	3.27	.92	3.10	2.81	1.51	2.77	3.15
Unsociable !	9.65[b]	5.52	4.69	6.18[a]	4.77	5.44	5.43[a]	5.42	4.79

Note. The items were presented in the order shown above. Lower scores indicate ratings toward the left pole. Thus, when the favorable pole is on the left, lower scores indicate more favorable ratings and vice versa. df = 1.88 for all items.

[a] $p < .05$ [b] $p < .01$ [c] $p < .001$

Table 2

Varimax Factor Loadings

	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Item	Prof. Comp.	Nurtur.	Adjustment	Ded. to Fam.
Responsible	.41	-.54	.18	.13
Selfish	.11	.62	.10	-.03
Competitive	.66	.09	.04	-.20
Unhappy	-.11	.48	-.13	-.04
Secure	.17	-.34	.08	.30
Dedicated to career	.66	.06	.13	-.42
Insensitive to others	.01	.63	-.05	-.45
Personal satisfaction	.20	.13	.75	-.11
Unstable	-.09	.48	-.58	-.03
Friendly	.26	.02	.60	-.09
Tense	.18	.20	-.31	-.36
Dependent	-.22	.12	.01	-.08
Affectionate	-.28	-.35	.61	.27
Unintelligent	-.03	.51	-.31	.05
Professionally competent	.68	.03	.25	.25
Likable	.25	-.25	.57	.24
Unreliable	-.17	.33	-.48	.06
Personality adj. problems	-.21	-.07	-.11	-.08
Successful in job	.54	-.06	.32	.27
Uninfluential	.10	.03	.06	.05
Dedicated to family	-.03	.04	-.05	.85
Unattractive	-.49	.22	-.04	.01
Comfortable with others	.66	-.30	.21	.11
Unsociable	-.35	.64	-.14	.15